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George V. Lauder
Director, Public Affairs

21 October 1986

DCI:

Thought you might be interested in seeing what Lally Weymouth wrote on Central America after her trip to the area. As you will recall, I arranged for Vickers to brief her before she went.



George V. Lauder

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*Note - Lally Weymouth
sent copy to DCI
23 Oct*

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ELIZABETH G. WEYMOUTH

Dear Mr. Lauder,
Many Thanks for everything.
I wanted you to see the
story I wrote after doing
many interviews in the region. (over)

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Give my best to the Doctor -

Lolly Weymouth

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THE WASHINGTON POST

Our Stark Choices in Central America

If the Contras Can't Win, What Do We Do Then?

By Lally Weymouth

CAN THE CONTRAS win? Can they overthrow the Sandinista government of Nicaragua? Reagan administration officials in Washington assure you that they can. But if you ask the question in Central America today, you get some disturbing answers.

Central American leaders I met on a recent tour of Costa Rica, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua and Guatemala were unanimous in expressing skepticism about the contras' chances. Their comments added up to a bleak forecast of prospective American failure in the region and Soviet and Cuban success.

The problems cited by Central American leaders include:

■ **American indecisiveness.** Many officials in Central America say they doubt the staying power of the contras' main backer, the United States. Convinced that the United States will eventually back away from supporting the contras, the Central Americans are reluctant to stick out their necks. Some hope for a U.S. invasion of Nicaragua to eliminate the Sandinistas, but they also want to hedge their bets in case they are left stranded on the front lines of a Soviet-backed state.

Azcucena Ferrey, a member of one of Nicaragua's opposition political parties, summed up the despair felt by so many Central Americans in regard to the U.S.:

"We saw the Berlin Wall go up, and the

Lally Weymouth writes regularly about foreign affairs for The Los Angeles Times Syndicate.

U.S. said it wouldn't be permitted. Then came Cuba, and they said it wouldn't happen. Then the U.S. said it wouldn't permit a second Cuba here. But here we are, seven years into a Marxist-Leninist regime, and I ask myself, 'What is the U.S. going to do? Is it going to propose another \$100 million every three to four months?' . . . How do you want us to push for change when the U.S. administration isn't going to push?"

■ **Sandinista strength.** The Nicaraguan junta has built a powerful military. There are about 65,000 men in the regular army and at least 100,000 more in the militias and reserves. The Soviet Union and Cuba have provided advisers and modern anti-guerrilla weapons, including the Hind helicopters which have performed so effectively in Afghanistan in the war against the mujahideen.

A senior Honduran military officer told me: "The contras do not represent a solution to the problem we are facing in Nicaragua because currently, Nicaragua constitutes one of the strongest armed forces in Central America."

One U.S. official offered a terse summary: "Power flows from the barrel of a gun, and in Nicaragua, they have the guns. Unless someone with more and better guns throws them out, they'll stay in power."

■ **Weak contra leadership.** Listen to the grim forecast given to me by Costa Rica's President Oscar Arias, who said flatly: "I don't think the contras have a chance to win. If the purpose is to overthrow the Sandinista government, it is unlikely to happen. The contras don't have a charismatic leader, the Sandinistas are very powerful, and they'll get more help from the Soviets."

Even contra fans admit that the contras could use a charismatic leader like Jonas Savimbi of Angola's UNITA guerrilla army. Contra leader Adolfo Calero, although liked and respected by many, doesn't excite people.

■ **Lack of popular support for the contras inside Nicaragua.** One problem the contras face is how to muster support in a state that is controlled ruthlessly by quiet terror.

President Jose Napoleon Duarte of El Salvador, a man who speaks with some authority since he got the guerrillas under control in his own country, told me: "You cannot impose (a liberation movement) from the outside, unless you invade. To get the people of any country to liberate itself, it must come from the inside." Duarte says he tells the Nicaraguan resistance leaders that to win "is a matter of winning the hearts of the people inside and not depending much on what's coming from outside. The Sandinistas were in Managua. They were inside."

The contras also need more international support, from countries other than the United States, says Enrique Ballanos, probably the leading opposition leader inside Nicaragua. "The contras cannot win by themselves," he said. "It's too little too late. They need diplomatic and political support around the world. The Central Americans see no will in the U.S. We've experienced the Bay of Pigs. You've left people stranded. You pull the rug out from under your friends."

■ **Our fence-sitting allies.** Everywhere I went in the region, I heard the same fears and doubts—and the same eagerness not to get involved.

Costa Rica, the oldest and most authentic democracy in Central America, is officially following a line of neutrality. President Arias is scathing about the Sandinista regime and worries that it will export sabotage and instability throughout the region. But he's trying to stay out of the fray.

"Every day the whole world is seeing how the Sandinistas are identifying more and more with the Soviet bloc," says Arias. "Look at Daniel Ortega with Gadhafi and Fidel Castro (at the Nonaligned summit). . . . If there was any hope that Nicaragua could become non-aligned, not totally identified or committed with the Marxist world, there is no doubt now."

In Guatemala, president Vicio Cerezo is pursuing a policy he labels "active neutrality" which he says doesn't mean ideological neutrality. "We are in favor of democracy and pluralism," he told me in his office. "If we have to decide and choose, we're going to decide in favor of democracy."

President Jose Azcona of Honduras is providing a base for the contras, but even he seems doubtful they can win. He says the Sandinistas are willing to remain in power at any cost: "By force there has to be opposition and this opposition has the right to raise arms." Honduras has offered the contras military bases in return for U.S. guarantees of assistance if it is invaded.

■ **The contras' view.** I met Enrique Bermudez, the military leader of the contras, in Tegucigalpa, Honduras. Bermudez, dressed in a khaki shirt, was optimistic about the prospects for his troops.

If the U.S. had not cut off the aid back in 1984, Bermudez said, the contras could have won by now. As a result of the aid cutoff, he said, the contras had to leave certain areas and the Sandinistas had the chance to go in and remove the sympathetic local population. Now they must start again, when they receive the promised \$100 million in U.S. assistance.

After the Contras get the aid, Bermudez says the following four months will be crucial. For example, it will be important to see, he explained, if the local Nicaraguan population will join the 18,000 contras he says exist today. "We are fighting for people, not for terrain," he said.

But even Bermudez expressed doubt that his men can seize power by military force alone. I was startled to hear him say: "We don't expect a military defeat of the total army. Total military victory is not in our minds. (The goal is) softening or weakening, lowering the morale of the Sandinistas. We expect to increase our propaganda and diplomatic action. If we have some early successes, then international support will come. I believe the Sandinistas will be in a serious crisis at the end of the \$100 million."

After visiting with the leaders of Central America, I was left with the feeling that the United States faces a stark choice in the region. The contras probably can't win, given the unreliability and insufficiency of American support and other factors. That means the United States must either pursue a policy of containment through the Contadora process or, if it is serious about preventing a second Cuba in the Western hemisphere, consider direct United States military intervention to overthrow the Sandinistas.

Edward Ulibarri, a distinguished Costa Rican journalist, says that most Central Americans would welcome a U.S. invasion, "but don't say it. They'd like to the U.S. to take care of it."

One high-ranking Salvadoran army officer suggested a U.S.-Central American invasion of Nicaragua. "I think there should be military action not only by the U.S. but also by the democratic countries in this area. It's the only road left." A senior U.S. official in the area endorsed this idea. The contras, he said, would give us time to consolidate U.S. and Central American opinion in favor of an invasion.

"We can win with an invasion," he said.